



Diego Garcia's isolation helps protect its natural beauty, which is a major benefit of life on the remote Indian Ocean island, residents say.

Island Focus

Story and Photo by Steve Harding

At first glance, Diego Garcia might seem too remote to be an important U.S. military installation. Lying some 900 miles southwest of the southern tip of India, and about halfway between Africa and Indonesia, the island seems a long way from anywhere.

Yet its location is one of Diego Garcia's best features, officials say, for

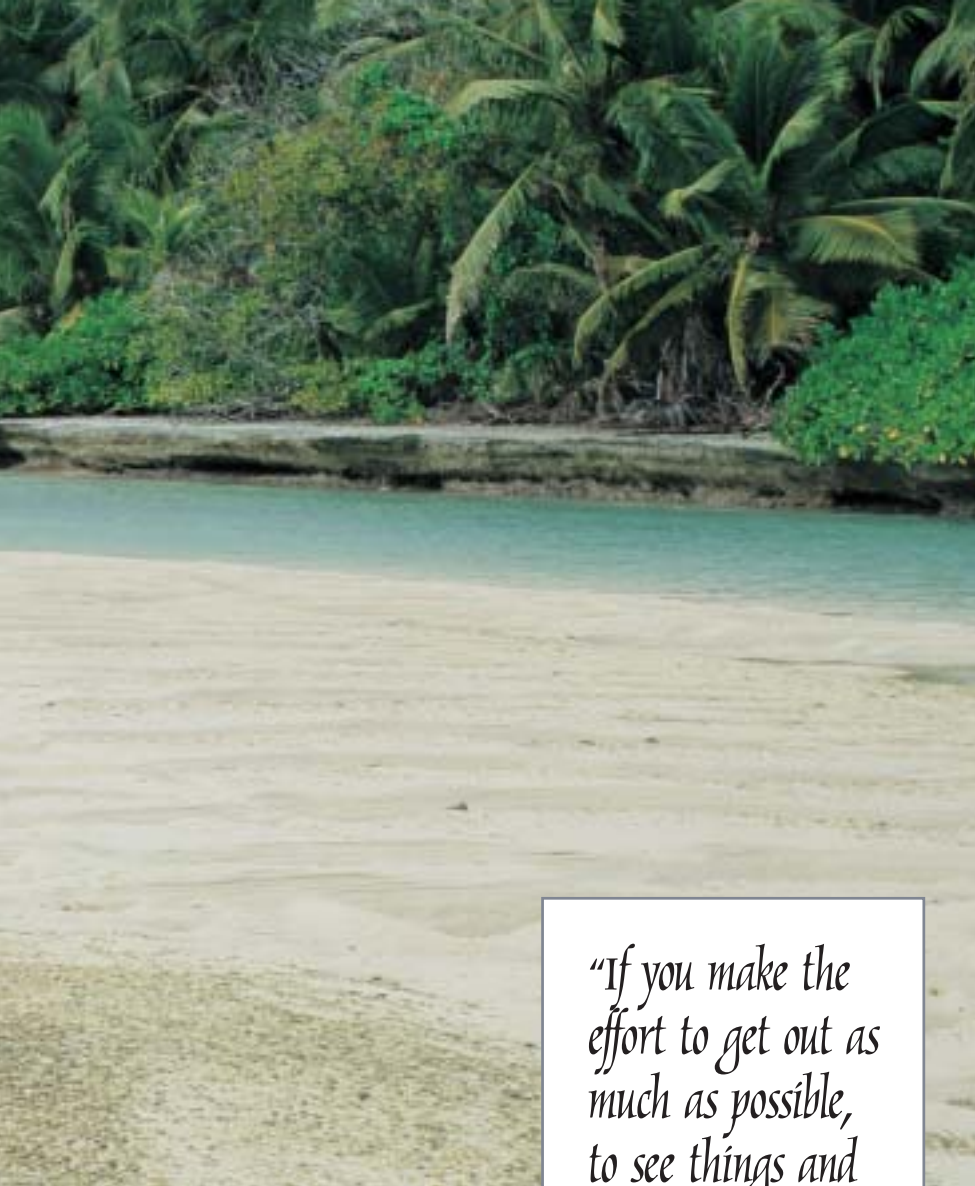
it's well within aircraft and ship range of several regions that are strategically important to the United States — including the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia.

An Ideal Location

Shaped like a horseshoe and said by many residents to look from the air like a large human footprint, Diego

Garcia is a coral atoll stretching about 34 miles from tip to tip. The low-lying island covers about 10.5 square miles, is covered by coconut palms and other tropical vegetation, and encompasses a lagoon that is some 13 miles long and 6.5 miles across at its widest point.

Discovered by the Portuguese in the 16th century, since 1815 Diego Garcia has been governed and policed by Great Britain as the British Indian



Ocean Territory. The United States leases space for an airfield and other military facilities, and uses the lagoon as a harbor for the 15 ships carrying prepositioned equipment and supplies for the Army, Marine Corps and Air Force.

The lagoon is an ideal harbor for the LMSRs and other vessels, said Navy Capt. Edward C. Zurey, commander of Afloat Prepositioning Ships Squadron 4.

"The squadron was initially based in the Arabian Gulf, but moved to Diego Garcia two years ago because the atoll offers excellent anchorage and great force protection, and because its location allows us to get to any part of our area of operations within a fairly short time," he said. "And on top of all that, this island is a very interesting place to live."

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Given Diego Garcia's remoteness, residents say that living on the island has both its ups and downs.

"The fact that it's so isolated is actually one of Diego Garcia's best points, in terms of outdoor activities,"

said SFC Dale Buck, one of the technical representatives assigned to the island's Army COSIS team. The nearby waters teem with marine life, he said, and the lagoon and uncrowded beaches are ideal for sailing, swimming and snorkeling.

"In terms of off-duty time, things don't get much better than here on Diego Garcia," agreed CPT Jacob H. Freeman, commander of a Japan-based 599th Transportation Group Deployment Support Team working on the island at the time of Soldiers' visit. "The facilities and the morale, welfare and recreation programs are great, and there are so many different events to keep you occupied when you're not working."

Though some Air Force and Army Reserve personnel temporarily assigned to the island to support Operation Enduring Freedom activities are housed in a vast tent city near the airfield, most permanent-party military members live in standard dormitory- and barracks-style buildings. There are several dining facilities on the island, as well as clubs, chapels, a bank, a library, a small hospital and a post exchange-like "ship's store" open to all residents.

"I've been on Diego Garcia for 15 months, and I wish they'd let me stay here until I retire," said SSG Dhana Belding, another COSIS team member. "The island is very nice, and most of the services — like haircuts, cleaning and laundry — are free. The only real downside is that it's an unaccompanied tour."

For most island residents, the quality of life on Diego Garcia is what they make of it, said Navy Lt. Carmelo W. Nicastro Jr., APSRON 4's operations officer.

"If you make the effort to get out as much as possible, to see things and meet the other people on the island, your tour here can be a really positive experience," Nicastro said. "And if you make the most of your time here, you'll really miss it when you leave." □